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New perspectives on genericity at the interfaces

Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Genericity has recently become a central topic of debate in both linguistics and cognitive science.

The set of questions addressed in the two disciplines stems from the foundational work in *The Generic Book* (Carlson and Pelletier, 1995), most notably from the idea that generic sentences involve a generic quantifier GEN.

This hypothesis, which has led the research on generics across languages for thirty years, is now being reconsidered, and linguists have attempted to locate the root of genericity by considering the sources of the generic interpretation of the sentences. A recent publication in the domain (Mari, Beyssade, Del Prete, 2012), dedicated to discussion about the sources of generic interpretation, has identified three of these sources, in the subject phrase, in the verb phrase, and at the sentence level. The question of the interface between the cognitive and linguistic aspects of the interpretation of generic sentences is nonetheless not addressed.

In the meanwhile, cognitive scientists have also been considering in detail the cognitive foundations of the generic quantifier GEN. Like linguists, they have reached the conclusion that there is no such quantifier and that generic statements are in fact not quantificational. They propose a variety of arguments against treating generic statements along the lines of universal quantification. A volume about the cognitive aspects of genericity is also to appear (Leslie, forthcoming).

The present issue of the Recherches Linguistiques de Vincennes tries to establish a dialogue between linguists and cognitive scientists on the subject of genericity. The question that is addressed across the variety of papers in this volume is what are the mechanisms that are at play in the generic interpretation of the sentences, on the assumption that genericity and quantification obey different, although related, mechanisms.

A whole new discussion emerges from this *rencontre* and develops across the papers in this issue, which addresses the question of genericity at

the interface with cognition, ontology, logic, and the lexicon. This issue is organized in four parts, in which genericity is studied from various perspectives.

Genericity and cognition

James Hampton. “Generics as reflecting conceptual knowledge”. Hampton proposes that generics reflect the nature of the conceptual system, whose prototype structure and vague boundaries make traditional treatments of truth and logic problematic. Examples of empirical evidence from the literature on concepts and reasoning are used to illustrate the argument.

Sarah-Jane Leslie. “Generics articulate default generalizations”. Leslie’s paper argues that generics articulate cognitively fundamental, default generalizations. Quantifiers, in contrast, articulate more sophisticated and taxing generalizations. This suggests that our most basic way of forming general judgments is not driven solely by quantitative, prevalence-based information.

Sandeep Prasada. “Mechanisms for characterizing kinds and classes”. Prasada’s paper briefly reviews recent research that proposes that our conceptual systems formally distinguish kinds and classes which are given voice via lexical nominals and phrasal nominals, respectively. These two ways of representing multiplicities are shown to afford different ways of representing and characterizing generic knowledge. Formal characteristics of the mechanisms needed to represent kinds and classes are discussed and shown to play a role in explaining a number of phenomena concerning generic language.

Genericity and logic

Ariel Cohen. “Generics as modals”. Cohen argues, on both empirical and theoretical grounds, that a generic such as *Birds fly* does not mean that all normal birds fly, but rather that the probability for a randomly chosen bird to fly is high, and this tendency is expected to continue.

Christian Retoré. “Variable types for meaning assembly: a logical syntax for generic nouns phrases introduced by *most*”. Retoré proposes a model that computes semantic representations viewed as formulae of higher order multisorted logic by assembling them in type theory (second order lambda calculus), in particular for sentences involving generics introduced by “*most*”.

Alice ter Meulen. “Generic in information structure. Exceptions vs counterexamples”. Ter Meulen’s paper shows that generic information is persistent in recalcitrant situations, as it is immunized against counterevidence. This model theoretic account provides a new formal semantics of its information structure in an epistemologically flavored semantics of generics.

Genericity and ontology

Olga Borik and Teresa Espinal. “On definite kinds”. The authors challenge the standard assumption that the generic or kind reading for NPs is modeled over pluralities. Instead, they defend the hypothesis that kinds are referred to by definite DPs with no Number projection.

Alda Mari. “A note on generic quantification and the ontology of *twins* and *bikinis*”. Mari’s paper acknowledges that the only type of nominals that can appear unmodified in “*des*” generic sentences in French are “inherently plural predicates” like *twins*. On the assumption that quantification requires individuation, the author explains how these predicates denote a plural “individual”, resorting to an intensional notion of “coordinated whole”.

Genericity and the lexicon

Yael Greenberg. “Genericity and (non) accidentalness”. Greenberg’s paper looks at the interaction between generics with indefinite singular and bare plural subjects (*Dogs have 4 legs* and *A dog has 4 legs*), which are traditionally claimed to express “nonaccidentalness”, and a construction which seems to express “accidentalness”, namely *happens to* (as in *John happens not to see well*).

Svetlana Vogeleeer. “Habituals with indefinite singular objects: aspect and modality”. Vogeleeer argues that the class of habituals with no quantificational adverbials consists of two different groups. The differences between these groups are accounted for in terms of their interaction with viewpoint aspect and in terms of their respective modal component responsible for the generalization.

The papers gathered in the present issue have been presented either as invited or as contributed talks at the conference GENIUS 3. This conference belongs to the series that has been initiated within the ANR project 08-JCJC-0069-01 led by Alda Mari.

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